Just Alike

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Just Alike

by Pragnificent (PragmaticHominid)

Summary

Part Two of the AU where Hannibal is a troubled FBI profiler and Will is a psychiatrist and serial killer.

He lifts his head and kisses Will again, and he knows that Will can taste his blood and that the taste excites him because when Hannibal draws back Will's hands skitter down Hannibal's stomach and reach eagerly for his fly.

Hannibal brushes the fingers away gently. He takes Will's hands in his own, but lightly, as though they are a moth that might be easily crushed. "Not yet."

Will frowns. "Please," he says. Not a plea this time.

Chapter 1

Will holds the door open for him, and Hannibal crosses the office to sit in his accustomed chair. Will takes the chair opposite from Hannibal. He crosses his legs and folds his hands over his knees.

“What would you like to talk with me about tonight?” Will asks. His eyes are steady on Hannibal. It would be easy to let himself be lulled into complacency by the softness in those eyes and the warmth in Will’s voice, even knowing what he does.

“I quit my job,” Hannibal tells him. He watches Will carefully to see how he takes it; the flicker of disappointment, he thinks, is a deliberate effort at misdirection on Will’s part. Beneath it, there’s relief and… speculation, Hannibal thinks.

“And why did you do that?”

“It didn’t feel safe - for either of us - for me to be there. I found myself thinking about all the case files sitting back in the office, wondering if I know you well enough to pick out which ones were yours. I think that I could make a few strong guesses.”

“Oh?”

“Yes. And after that I thought that if one of their siblings was to come directly to me for help, it would be difficult for me to deny them what I was never given myself.”

“Justice?” Will offers, but Hannibal shakes his head, annoyed at the suggestion. “Closure maybe?”

“I’m not sure that those concepts really mean anything, beyond the comfort that they’re meant to offer. They’re the tidy packaging that we’re told we ought to wrap our grief in, but it’s only to hide it away lest it become ugly or discomforting to others.”

“What, then?”

“The chance to give back as good as they’ve gotten.”

“A reckoning of accounts.”

“I think so. And a body to bury, I suppose. You don’t dump yours, do you?”

The wrinkle of Will’s nose is offended. “Dump? I’ve never.”

“The ones that we never find are among yours, then - I thought so. Some of the high-concept corpse displays, too, yes?”

“Is that how they talk about my work, down at the Bureau?”

“Your messaging is a bit blatant.”

“I dislike the idea of being misunderstood, so I always strive for clarity and accessibility,” Will says, perhaps a bit defensively. Hannibal isn’t especially surprised when he redirects the conversation. “You weren’t really worried that you’d crack under the pleading of some distraught big sister or weepy brother, were you?”

Hannibal shifts in his chair. “They aren’t stupid down there. They notice things about people. And I spend enough of my time playing pretend without having to cover for your…”

“My bullshit?” Will supplies, raising an eyebrow.

“I might have said ‘predations,’ or maybe ‘games.’ But yes. Fine, if that’s how you like it.” Hannibal feels himself growing irritated, but is not entirely sure if it’s Will that he’s frustrated with or himself.

“Get to the heart of it,” Will tells him, but gently.

“I should feel worse about all of this than I do - for knowing what I know but not turning you in. For coming back here, despite that knowledge. I would like to feel worse.”

Will leans forward and rests a hand on Hannibal’s knee. “I’m glad that you don’t.”

“Jack Crawford showed up at my house to try to bully me into coming back. He saw my hands.”

Will withdraws, sitting back in his chair and recrosses his legs. The end of one of the legs of his pants is wrinkled, the crease muddled by the broken-glass pattern of lines in the fabric. The sight is, to Hannibal, vaguely aggravating yet somehow endearing. The indisputable humanness of Will hangs on those wrinkles, the small imperfections that he’s overlooked, so much more so than the calm patience that he exudes as he pursues this line of questioning.

“What did you tell him?”

“I refused to talk about it. I know his tricks too well to let him plow over me, but I don’t think he’s given up - not on getting an answer to that question or on getting me back into the field.”

It’s been three weeks since Will’s invitation to join him at his home for dinner ended so badly. Hannibal’s hands have healed, the bruises fading away and the torn skin knitting together, but he has visible scarring on two of the knuckles of his left hand, where he cut himself against Will’s teeth.

Will looks better than he did, but a large white bandage still covers the entirety of his left cheek, from directly below his eye to the hinge of his jaw. When Hannibal asked the week before to see beneath the gauze Will turned an ugly stream of mockery on him, so Hannibal doesn’t try again now. He hopes that the scar won’t be too ugly.

They are waiting for the cheek to heal before they start with the dental implants, Hannibal understands. One of the teeth that Hannibal knocked out had been whole enough to put back into place, but the other three were too broken. The gaps work a certain change on Will’s voice that he doesn’t care for and hopes will go away soon.

The memory of laying his hands on Will still fills Hannibal with an uncomfortably heady mixture of shame and satisfaction.

Will regards him carefully, his hands folded under his chin. “Where do you see what we’re doing going from here?” he asks.

The question is deliberately vague, which probably means Will is curious about how he will take it. Hannibal has resolved to avoid any further assertions of desire. He hasn’t forgotten the way that Will laughed at the idea that Hannibal might love him, and Hannibal doesn’t intend to give him more ammunition.

He keeps his response in the realm of the professional.

“We’ve barely begun the work that I came here for. Actually, doctor, you have been remiss. Dr. Bloom sent me to you to be accessed for C-PTSD, but we’ve hardly discussed anything relevant to that possibility. You were so focused on hearing about my work that you’ve barely even bothered to ask me about my childhood.”

“You don’t perceive your responses to Stammets and the other cases as relevant to past trauma?”

“I thought that I had made it clear that they didn’t trouble me.”

“I didn’t ask you if you were troubled. I asked if you think there’s a link between what happened to you and the fact that you aren’t troubled by things nearly everyone else would find horrifically troubling.”

Hannibal is silent. He’s not sure himself if it is stubbornness on his part or an inability answer.

“I’ll ask you something else, then,” Will says. “Would you have answered me truthfully, if I’d pressed you to talk about your childhood?”

“Not right away, no. But I think that I was almost ready, before what happened at dinner.”

“I know you were. I’d planned to offer you a drink or two after dinner for the sake of courage, and to try to broach the subject then. But then things went poorly.” Will spreads his hands, waving what had happened away as though he bore no responsibility for it.

“I don’t think that I’d like to now,” Hannibal says. “Not anymore.”

“Look - you can accuse me of going off script for my own edification as many times as you like, Hannibal, and I won’t say that you’re even entirely wrong. But the fact of the matter is that I’ve always proceeded with your best interests at heart, insofar as doing so didn’t put me into danger - and even sometimes when it did.” He gestures towards his bandaged cheek with wiggling fingers as evidence of this assertion.

“A head-on approach is rarely a productive way to get started. You don’t slap someone down in a chair and say, ‘tell me about when you were scared or lonely or desperate,’ ‘tell me about

the times that you were raped,' 'tell me what the beatings were like,' 'talk about all the awful things that have happened to you.' It's intrusive. It would do more harm than good.

"We work up to it, and then it's easier to work through it once trust has been established. People need space to open up properly, especially when they're still hurting.

"You're a unique case, Hannibal, and I've adapted my approach accordingly, but fundamentally you need many of the same things that all my patients need."

"Such as?" Hannibal keeps his voice carefully neutral, but for a change he does not do so because he senses that Will is looking for cracks in his armor or spoiling for a fight. He has sought a way to articulate the truth of himself, but he can't shake the feeling of vulnerability that comes with the suspicion that Will has seen even more than he intended to give.

"Permission to feel your own feelings without casting aspersions on yourself. Permission to feel angry. Or scared, or bitter, or even indifferent to what happened to you, if that's the way you really feel.

"And a sympathetic ear. Someone who really understands and who is willing to listen without casting judgment."

The irony of that strikes Hannibal so strongly that he can't help the way the edge of his mouth twitches towards a rueful expression. The grin that Will makes in response is wide and full of good natured self-deprecating humor. He bobs his head and waves his hand as though shooing a fly away.

"Yes, yes - I'm in no position to judge, Hannibal, I know it. But that's half of why I'm so good at what I do."

"What else?"

Will becomes suddenly earnest. "Good advice. And forgiveness," he says, and it is hard to doubt his sincerity. "It's hard for us to forgive ourselves for what's been done to us, isn't it, especially when we survive what others did not?

"Not everyone's lucky enough or bold enough to be able to personally kill their abuser, though I'd recommend it to anyone who has a reasonable shot at getting away with it.

"Survivor's guilt is especially tricky. It can weigh a soul down under a mountain of pain and loss and self-hatred, but you can't just begin to move rocks willy-nilly or you risk an avalanche. I'm careful about what I do, Hannibal."

He pauses. His eyes on Hannibal are calm and reassuring, full of a patient kindness. Hannibal feels safe under that gaze, as strange as it seems. "That said - and I'm only asking right now because you brought it up, understand - would you like to talk about what happened before you washed up at the orphanage?"

"No," Hannibal says, and the word nearly sticks in his throat, his mouth is so dry. He knows that Will has only the barest bones of his history; parents and younger sister killed, Hannibal

found wandering alone in the snow and taken to the orphanage, where he grew up. Maybe Will is only making educated guesses, but it seems to Hannibal that he knows more than he has any right knowing.

“Let’s talk about something else then,” Will says, and leans forward in his chair again, arms draped over his knees and fingers steepled. “I’m driving home next week, back to Louisiana. I’d like you to ride down with me.”

Hannibal blinks. “Why?”

“I enjoy your company,” Will says. When Hannibal still hesitates he adds, “If I wanted to hurt you, Hannibal, I wouldn’t need to cross five different state lines to do it.”

Hannibal knows that isn’t necessarily true - there might be things that Will could do to him at an isolated family estate that aren’t feasible in Baltimore. He remembers the picture of the dappled hunting dogs with the uncanny blue eyes that hung in Will’s kitchen. Still.

“That’s not what I’m concerned about,” Hannibal says, and is faintly amused at how Will’s face can’t seem to decide if he should be touched or miffed by the idea that Hannibal isn’t worried that he might try to kill him. “If you’re planning on murdering someone during the trip then I don’t want to be involved.”

“You’re involved in everything I do now, Hannibal. You’re complicit - legally and ethically. You know that.”

Hannibal can’t deny this and he doesn’t try. “I don’t want to be near it, I don’t want to see it and I don’t want to hear about it from you. I do not want to taste it. Can you agree to that?”

Will waves the concern away. “I’m not going down there to hunt,” he assures Hannibal. “Or at least, nothing more exotic than pigs.”

“Is that a euphemism?”

“Feral hogs, Hannibal. Don’t worry about it.”

“Short pig,” Hannibal says. “Okay.”

It takes, perhaps, ten seconds for it to register with Will that it was intended as a joke. When it does Will’s face goes to war with itself, hilarity and an outraged groan fighting for domination while Will tries to hold it all in, lips pressed firmly together even while his face reddens. Hannibal watches him close his eyes and work at regulating his breathing.

When he feels under control, he looks at Hannibal. “Christ,” he says, tears in the corner of his eyes from the effort to keep from breaking out laughing, “you weren’t joking when you said you have a dreadful sense of humor.”

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hannibal wonders sometimes where his sense of fear went.

He knows that he did not lose it when he lost Mischa, because even before all of that began he has few memories of ever feeling truly scared. And although he can remember no time, before or since, when he felt so badly frightened as when he began to understand what their captors meant to do with them, his primary emotion at the time was a furious stymied rage at the men and at his own inability to extricate himself and his sister from their control.

Returning to Will's house ought to scare him, he knows, and not just a little bit; even the idea of seeing that house again, (and never mind its occupant), ought to provoke a cold sweat and set his heart hammering, but what sense of anxiety he has is distant and unimportant. It flutters in the corner of his vision, as though it is something separate from himself.

He's curious, mainly, as he looks up the long driveway at the crimson and ivory Plymouth Fury parked outside the garage. The hot rod's hood is up, and when Hannibal pulls into the drive Will steps out from behind the car and raises a hand in greeting.

By the time Hannibal has parked and come around the front of his own car, Will's head is ducked over the engine again.

"Everything all right?" Hannibal asks. He is conscious of the tools resting inside their open box on the pavement between them, and of everything that he might do to Will or that might be done to him with those tools.

"Mm-hmm. Admiring more than tinkering," Will admits. His hair falls across his face when he looks up from the engine, and when he brushes it away he leaves a thin streak of oil across his forehead. He smiles up at Hannibal affably.

It's the work of four long strides to close the space between himself and Will. Hannibal takes them spontaneously, aware of what he is doing but acting without forethought or planning, and as he moves towards Will he wets the edge of his thumb in his mouth.

There's a sharp intake of breath when he touches Will. As Hannibal runs his thumb along Will's forehead, applying just enough pressure to clean away the black mark, he feels Will begin to shake.

It worries Hannibal, because he doesn't understand it. He puts space between them quickly.

Shame, like fear, has been a rarity for him in the past, but it weighs heavy on him now.

Will turns away from him and starts up the walkway towards the house. "My bags are still inside," he says, without looking back at Hannibal.

It might be a mistake to go after him - it's obvious that Will wants to be left alone- but it seems important to Hannibal that he go inside the house again.

Will sighs audibly when Hannibal follows through the front door. "There's tea in the fridge… soda, bottle water. Whatever you want," Will says, gesturing vaguely towards kitchen before heading up the stairs.

It's the kitchen that Hannibal wants to see again anyway. He inventories himself as he surveys the room, taking everything in and consciously working through how he feels about it.

He's melancholy, looking at the chair where he had sat chopping tomatoes and listening to Will talk, because he doubts things will ever be that easy between them again, but it's not a completely negative feeling - he'd be lying to himself if he said he isn't excited to learn more about the new version of Will that he's uncovered, and he's always tried to avoid that sort of self-deception.

The picture of the hounds hanging over the table makes him vaguely uneasy, but it's only the thought of opening the fridge that provokes real anxiety. He doesn't want to do that.

Hannibal goes to the sink instead. He stands in the same place where he stood when his stomach rebelled at the realization of what he'd given it, remembering the bite of bile and panic.

When he hears Will come down the stairs and enter the kitchen, Hannibal doesn't turn. He lets Will approach him from behind, as he had that night with the needle. This time, Will keeps his distance.

There is no prickle of goose-flesh from the feel of Will's eyes on the back of his neck. Hannibal's heart rate does not change, even with the knowledge that he can't see what Will is doing.

"Alright?" he asks, and Hannibal, having confirmed for himself what he wanted to know, turns to face Will.

"All right," he agrees, and is pleased by the cheerful note in his own voice. "Will we leave now?"

Will's watching him oddly, and it seems to Hannibal that he is the cusp of asking some question - 'what were you doing in here?' maybe, or perhaps 'what did you mean by touching me like that?' - but when Hannibal meets his gaze Will averts his eyes.

The question, whatever it was, dies unvoiced. "Yeah," Will says, and nods.

He has a heavy bag in each hand, and it seems rude to Hannibal not to take one for him. "Let me -" he begins, stepping forward, but Will retreats back out of the kitchen and down the hallway.

Hannibal follows a little ways behind, letting him have his space.

Chapter End Notes

This is a little short, but life has really been kicking my ass the last couple of days, so I just wanted to get something up in the hopes that it will make some folks feel happy, because that usually helps me to feel a little better.

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Fury eats up miles beneath them.

Will has made this drive more times than he can remember - three or four times a year for well over a decade. It soothes him, the steady power of Detroit rolling iron beneath him and the familiarity of every curve in the road, each little landmark and curiosity along the path.

He's never before made the trip with someone else along, and in the week leading up to it Will spent a lot of time imagining what it would be like to share some of his observations about the scenery with Hannibal. Even moreso, he thought about how different it would be to have such an expanse of time, as long as the road between here and Home, in which to allow their conversations to grow in new ways.

Hours have gone by in nearly complete silence, though. Hannibal's face is still as he watches the hills and trees roll past outside the window. Will can't tell what he's thinking.

His own sense of panic is still large inside of him, and he turns it over in his head to try to understand it. It wasn't simply being touched that did it. Or even being touched specifically by Hannibal - the still fresh memory of him using his fists on Will doesn't explain it, although thinking of that still provokes in him a tangle of ugly feelings.

Part of it is that he was taken by surprise. He's not used to that.

Will can almost always predict what someone else will do before they do it, and from there it is easy to establish control and guide them in the direction that he wants them go. The idea that he might not always be able to read Hannibal is frightening because if he can surprise Will with tenderness than he might be able to just as easily surprise him with violence, which would mean that he is more vulnerable here now with Hannibal then he'd realized.

But more than that is the tenderness itself.

It *felt* real to Will, and that sense of unpremeditated sincerity throws into question every one of the rationales Will has used to explain away the feelings that Hannibal claims to bear for him.

Will has wanted to believe that he is more insightful than Hannibal - that he has a better understanding of his own feelings and Hannibal's as well, because if that is true then it means he is still in control of all of this and will be able to direct things as he wills, and never mind that he no longer has a clear idea of where he wants them to go.

The lack of clarity makes him feel unstable, and he has enough self-awareness to know that when he feels that way he is apt to become vindictive and petty.

But being conscious of that fact does little to influence his behavior.

When Will begins to chat up the waitress, Hannibal tries to ignore it.

The chair beneath him is wobbly, the red vinyl back so cracked from age that he imagines he can feel the rough texture through the back of his shirt.

He looks out through the diner's plate glass front to the rest of the truck stop, watching people walk past the electronic boot polishers and brightly flashing claw machine games.

When the waitress brings their food, Will turns his eyes up at her and flashes a 100 watt smile. Hannibal tries to ignore what Will's saying to her - it's nothing of consequence, anyway, shallow compliments and leading questions that provide opportunities for Will to offer more of the same.

When the young woman offers a last smile and tries to step away from the table, Will puts a hand on her wrist - lightly, without the slightest hint of force - and holding her with the warmth of his eyes, extending the chat for couple more minutes.

"Everything okay?" Will asks brightly, once she's gone, and Hannibal battles the urge to snarl at him.

"You're being rude," he says. "Let her do her job. She's here to earn a check, not to be propositioned by a man old enough to be her father."

"Please, don't make crass exaggerations - I did nothing of the sort," Will says, mildly.

"I think you're reading her wrong, by the way. It's an easy mistake. That homey, Midwestern look and wind-chafed skin are a good cover - she looks simple and straightforward, like a Mall of America ad - but I think she thinks she has *me* wrapped around her little finger, and she likes it."

Hannibal makes an annoyed sound. "Oh, but what would she say if she only *knew*?"

"I wondered the same. Shall we find out?"

"You'd twist the knife with a smile," Hannibal says. It's meant as an insult but as soon as it's out of his mouth he realizes it doesn't sounds that way.

It sounds like flirting. He knows Will hears it the same way, because he hoods his eyes and smiles up at Hannibal. "That's right."

Working hard to look disgusted, Hannibal picks up his fork. The act is easier to maintain when he looks down at his plate; the lettuce in his salad is nothing but iceberg, and it's wilted to boot. "This is pathetic."

"Your first mistake was ordering salad at a truck stop diner."

“I can’t eat this,” Hannibal says, dropping his fork onto the table with a clatter. “I won’t.”

“You’re overreacting."

Hannibal already knows that, and hearing it only makes him angrier. “I put up with the swill they served at the orphanage for seven years, and I’ll be damned if I’ll do that again. Why did we stop here?”

“You really don’t recognize the waitress? She’s the Hobbs girl.”

Hannibal blinks. He makes himself pause before searching the diner to find the waitress again, his face set carefully neutral. There she is - auburn hair and bright blue eyes, just like the ones her father took.

She’s chatting amicably with an older couple, but her eyes look over their heads and at Hannibal. He thinks that there might be a shade of calculation in those eyes, but that might not mean anything - she probably heard him denounce the salad and is weighing her options if he gives her trouble over it.

He looks back at Will. “I never met her before,” he says.

“Not even at the trial?”

“Jack never liked to put me on the stand,” Hannibal says, with a small shrug that says he doesn’t really blame him. “And it wasn’t much of a trial anyway. We caught Hobbs processing the third one at his hunting cabin. She was fifteen. The trial was a formality."

“That must have been hard for you to look at,” Will says.

Hannibal is too distracted to bother trying to decide if Will is being sincere or just trying to pick at him. He catches another glimpse of the woman as she steps through the kitchen doors. Her posture strikes him as self-confident.

“Everything considered, she’s doing well, don’t you think?”

“Looks that way,” Will says lightly, and there is something in his tone that makes Hannibal jerk his head back around to look at him.

That warm smile is back on his face. It’s the dangerous one.

Hannibal keeps his voice level. “I’ll burn your life down, Will,” he says. “Believe me.”

Will knows, as they get back into the car, that he’s misplayed his hand.

He’d put a lot of money into finding as many of the people associated with the cases Hannibal had cracked as could be located, and when he learned that the Abigail Hobbs might be found more or less along their route it seemed like a good opportunity for… something. To make it up to Hannibal for last month’s unfortunate weekend, he supposes.

“I meant for that to be a surprise, but I spoiled it,” Will admits, once they’re back on the road.

Hannibal considers Hannibal’s emotions to be his own private business, Will knows, and would prefer to view those of others in the same way. It isn’t really deliberate on Hannibal’s part, the way that he fills the interior of the Fury up with a suffocating bitterness that's edged with rage - if anything, he is trying to keep Will from sensing how he feels.

But there’s a difference between what Will knows rationally and what he feels, and this feels to him like an attack.

It’s hard for him to stay calm, with Hannibal’s emotions buffeting him the way they are. Will’s pulled between a desire to pacify him and resentment at having his internal space compromised so profoundly.

He glances away from the road and sees that Hannibal is watching him. “Is that meant to be an apology?”

“Look,” Will says. “I was just giving you a hard time, alright? I won’t bother the Hobbs girl. You can have my word on that.”

“Just how much is that worth?”

“A hell of a lot,” Will says, offended. “Anyway, I don’t really care to take women. There’ve been a few,” he admits, “but it doesn’t sit well with me - I’m apt to feel worse rather than better afterwards. That's not my meat.

“There’s no challenge in hurting someone who already expects to be hurt, and most women expect men to hurt them, one way or the other.

“It’s a lot better to break someone who has never realized that he might be breakable, who's used to being the one who gets to do the hurting rather than getting hurt,” Will continues. “Big men, ideally, men who are a lot bigger than me - bigger than you, even. Seeing the revelation starting to dawn on them, once they realize that they’ve been tricked and they’re trapped and that there’s nothing they can do about it… That’s half of it for me, right there.”

He chances a glance at Hannibal. The hunger is there, despite all Hannibal does to try to hide it. He likes hearing about this.

Will takes a gamble. “What do you think you’d like?”

He keeps his eyes on the road while he says this, guessing correctly that Hannibal will have an easier time answering if he doesn’t feel observed.

“Inconsiderate people,” Hannibal says, after only a short pause. “People who don’t stop to think about how their actions might impact others, or if they do realize it don't care."

“Rude people?”

“Yes.”

“You put a lot of work into understanding the rules and conforming to them, so you don’t feel very tolerant of those who won’t make the same effort.”

Will glaces at Hannibal just long enough to see that he’s frowning. “I don’t know if it’s that complicated. They just get under my skin.”

A lot of the tension has dissipated by the time they stop for the night - Will might even go so far as to say that they’ve been having a good time.

He leaves Hannibal waiting in the car while he goes into the hotel to book their rooms. Earlier, he’d considered the possibility of getting a single room and telling Hannibal that was all that was available. Will would like to see how Hannibal would take that news, and is curious as to what might develop from the situation.

But he doesn’t feel entirely safe with the idea now. Hannibal took the threat against the Hobbs girl very seriously, he knows. Will wouldn’t like to go to sleep around him until he’s had more of a chance to smooth that over.

He sees Hannibal master the mixture of disappointment and relief when Will hands him the key card for his own separate, non-adjoining room.

Tomorrow will go better, Will tells himself. By this time tomorrow, he’ll be back Home. He can show Hannibal the old place, and he'll get to see his hounds.

He’s worn out, but sleep is a long time coming. Will wonders if Hannibal is having any better luck.

Chapter End Notes

I know that canonically, all eight of GJH's victims were about 18, give or take a year. This doesn't really make a lot of sense to me, though, because if he's taking girls that are the same age as Abi then he's been working VERY quickly.

It seems more likely to me that he started about when she was 14/15, and murdered one or two girls who were about the same age as her every year. In this AU, of course, Hannibal had been active on the case from the start, so they caught GJH much sooner than happened in the canon.

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The plantation house casts a long and sinister shadow as the Fury rolls past it.

Will parks the car in very old looking barn that's been converted into a garage. A few other cars, none of them as ostentatious as the Fury, share the space with an elderly pickup truck and a number of huge and vaguely insectile pieces of farm machinery.

They get out of the car. "Over here first," Will says, and leaving the luggage behind in the car, he starts off towards an outbuilding set even further from the house than the barn. Hannibal can hear the barking of dogs coming from that direction.

Hannibal follows a few steps behind him, a little uneasy. He glances back at the house, and is struck again by the quiet sense of danger that hangs over the apparently empty structure. The row of white rocking chairs on the veranda rock out of sync with one another in the breeze.

"Are we alone here?" he asks.

"I asked the staff to take the time off while we're down here. I often do - I enjoy my privacy."

"Uh-huh. Are they scared of you?"

Will thinks about that. "Not particularly, I don't imagine."

They are drawing close to the building from which the barking is emanating.

It smells like a trap, but Hannibal follows him inside anyway.

It's not fear, exactly, that causes Hannibal to hesitate in the doorway, Will knows. The number of times that Will has sensed real fear emanating from Hannibal might be counted on one hand, and if Will is honest with himself he must acknowledge how jealous that makes him feel.

Hannibal is a man at war with himself - a man who has declared war on fundamental pieces of himself out of a misguided desire for some sort of righteousness that he cannot even articulate - but there is also a stability to him, a serenity that comes with a solid sense of self-knowledge.

That's what appeals to Will, even more than the potential for violence. It's something that Will would like to draw into himself. A lot of things would be easier for him if he could work out how to be more like Hannibal, at least in that regard.

It's not fear that Hannibal is radiating now so much as a sense of… concern that he might have made a mistake, that Will might have brought him all this way just so he could turn his dogs on Hannibal for the pleasure of seeing them tear him apart.

The hounds are loud, ecstatic at seeing him again. Will whistles, once and sharply, and the din comes to an almost complete silence. A few of the younger dogs whine, too excited to keep entirely still, but that's alright in Will's eyes - they're still learning.

He walks over to the run that holds the three young dogs, hardly more than puppies, and crouches in front of the chain link gate. The pups squirm, long tails wagging furiously enough to shake their entire bodies. One stands up on hind legs and tries to press her muzzle through the wire, and when there is a pause in her stream of whimpering he says, "Good girl, Beth," and reaches up and threads his fingers through the fence to scratch her behind the ear.

"Hannibal, come over here," Will says, without taking his eyes from the dogs. He feels his face wanting to go silly and soft, looking at Beth squirm with happiness, and tries to get a handle on it before Hannibal can see.

Hannibal doesn't come, though, and Will looks over his shoulder and sees that he's still lingering in the doorway.

Will sighs and stands up, turning to face Hannibal.

"It's frustrating, you know, constantly being doubted like this," he says, walking toward Hannibal. "That's a big part of why I would have rather waited longer to be frank about myself with you, if I ever even decided that I wanted to be."

It's a gamble, taking Hannibal's arm at the wrist. There's a chance, Will knows, that Hannibal might decide to up and deck him, out of surprise if nothing else. Instead, he allows Will to draw him towards the dog runs.

"This is important, alright?" Will continues, as he leads Hannibal to crouch in front of the pups' run and holds the back of Hannibal's hand up to the wire so the dogs can sniff it.

One of the dogs licks him, and Hannibal makes a face, more shocked than disgusted, and pulls his hand free from Will.

Will's laugh is genuine, not born of mockery or spite, and when Hannibal hears it he smiles and ducks his head.

"The others too," Will says. "I need to make sure that they know you're a friend."

Hannibal follows Will through the kennel, stopping in front of each run to let the dogs sniff his hand while Will speaks to them in a soft, friendly voice.

The puppies are easy to like, but he knows too much about the full-grown hounds to feel at ease with them. He knows that the speculation he saw in their faded blue eyes, a look that said they were wondering whether or not he might be meat, was not his imagination.

But they are, despite all of that, still dogs, and with Will they are friendly and silly and eager to please, vying for his attention as they move from one run to the next. They warm to Hannibal quickly, too. There's thirteen of them total, split between three sizable runs that offer access to large fenced-in yards.

Hannibal has an anxious moment when Will opens the first of the runs. The hounds ignore Hannibal completely, but they surge around Will, who goes to his knees among them, and for a moment Hannibal thinks that they have pulled him down and that he's in danger of being mauled.

Then Will starts to laugh again, the same sincerely joyful sound that he made earlier in response to Hannibal's surprise at the puppy licking him. It's entirely different from the cutting laughter that he's directed at Hannibal too many times since he discovered Will's secret, nor does it have much in common with the soft chuckle he'd used during their early therapy sessions, to coax or reassure Hannibal or to otherwise direct him.

This laugh is real, and as Hannibal watches him play with the milling hounds, he sees that Will's face is open and untroubled. He looks younger than his years, now, with one of the dappled hounds squirming in his lap and another tugging playfully at his forearm while a third tries to rest its paws on Will's shoulders so it can stick its nose inside his ear.

I want this, Hannibal thinks to himself, and is nearly overwhelmed by the rawness and the intensity of the feeling. *I want him. I want him like this - like he can be, when he isn't trying so hard to be less than he is.*

When Will glances up at him Hannibal is worried that the thought is naked on his face, but if Will sees it none of his usual contrivances come into play. Instead, he smiles up at Hannibal, and that smile is wide and bright and unpolished, dulled by none of the masks he usually uses to hold himself apart or maintain control over himself or others.

He motions for Hannibal to join him. So Hannibal does, lowering himself to the concrete floor and letting the hounds sniff and climb over him.

Chapter End Notes

It's fluff, it's a least a bit of fluff, finally!

I don't know about you guys, but I for one am relieved.

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“1790,” Will tells Hannibal, as they approach the veranda. “That was when the first section of this house was built. Two hundred and twenty-seven odd years ago, if you can believe that.”

“One of the children's homes I stayed at for some years was actually a converted castle,” Hannibal says, dryly. “I believe that it dated to the 14th century.”

“You’ve got me beat there. It must have been dreadful.”

“It was difficult to heat in the winter,” Hannibal allows. “Sometimes, when it was bad, I’d go without my blanket so the smaller children could share an extra one.”

He is not sure why he said this, except that one of the half-grown puppies is trotting at heel beside Will, and the soft look is still on his face. He wants to believe that they reached some sort of turning point, where he can say things that make him feel vulnerable once again without fear that Will might use them against him, but he has seen how quickly Will’s moods can shift.

And also - he has always wanted to tell someone of that, but has been afraid that they would believe that he was being melodramatic, maybe even making it up to make himself look good, or else that they would pity him.

With Will, he is worried about the exact opposite - that he might simply opt to make fun of him for it, but that potentiality is not nearly as bad as the other alternatives.

“You’re a very giving person, really,” Will says. He leans out over the veranda, looking out across the property. Hannibal joins him at the banister and gazes out in the same direction, wondering what Will sees when he looks that way.

“They were smaller than me,” Hannibal says. It is, in some ways, much easier to speak when he knows Will isn’t watching him. “You know that feeling, when you’re worried that if you tell people something good about yourself, they will think that it only goes to show how hard you have to work to hide the bad?”

“Intimately,” Will says.

“There was a man there - the castle had been in his family for nearly a five hundred years, but it was reappropriated after the war for orphans. I thought it was strange that he wasn’t bitter about that, watching generations of strange children growing up in his family home, but he never seemed to be. He liked us - he was old but he said having so many children around helped to keep his mind spry. He was a doctor. He helped me with my visa applications, and wrote letters for me too, when I was getting applying for school.”

“Pre-med?” Hannibal nods. “That’s a strange shift, pre-med to law enforcement.”

“It was brought to my attention, early into my studies, that every medical practitioner must expect to kill a patient - probably several - over the course of their career. I wasn’t prepared to accept that.”

“What did you think you were going to do as a cop?”

Hannibal shrugs. “Help people.”

“No bullshit, Hannibal. Come on.”

“No bullshit. Isn’t that why you became a psychiatrist, too?” Will spreads his hands, conceding the point. “And I’d read… You’ve heard of compensated psychopaths?”

“Of course. It’s more or less a discredited theory, but.”

“Well, I thought - rules and good order had kept me out of trouble while I was in the care of the state, more or less, and it seemed like the police force could offer something similar. A clear set of rules, there in black and white, and all I needed to do was adhere the code of conduct and enforce the rules, and I would know that I was doing okay without having to rely on my own sense of right and wrong, which I knew was skewed.”

“Walking the thin blue line.”

“I was young.”

Will puts a hand on Hannibal’s shoulder. It feels casual, but Hannibal knows that it is an experiment. Without looking at Will, he knows that he is watching Hannibal closely to see how he responds. Hannibal holds himself perfectly still until the hand falls away.

"Let's go inside," Will says, turning away, and Hannibal follows him.

Chapter End Notes

Tried to integrate some of book!Hannibal's history into the figure of the doctor at the orphanage.

This one is a little short, but the next one is probably going to be huge, I think, so I wanted to break them up.

Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

There were a few things in this chapter that were difficult to navigate, but I felt that it was important that I try, and I hope that I managed well enough in the execution.

I meant to say this earlier, but the primary difference between this AU and the canon is that I have switched the social classes into which Will and Hannibal were born. Everything that's changed stems from them needing to adapt themselves to a different set of resources and pressures, something I plan to continue to explore.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The entry doors are surrounded with stained glass transom and sidelights. As they pass, Will reaches toward one arm of the french cross that is etched there and taps it with the tip of his finger, hard enough to make Hannibal want to wince with fear that the glass might crack.

“That’s meant to ward off evil,” he says, and the irony in his voice gives the words a lilting tone. “It’s been my experience that it doesn’t work.”

He leads Hannibal through the house, commenting with a sort of clinical disdain on the house’ features and history. His pace is quick as they pass through the entry hall.

“That’s faux-bois - that means fake wood, in cause you didn’t know - open pierced frieze work molding,” he says, gesturing vaguely towards the walls, and when they pass under the crystal chandelier Will flicks his fingers upwards and says, “it’s a French Baccarat. Supposedly it weighs three hundred pounds, so try not spend too much time standing under it. It has to fall someday, don’t you think? Well, it’s disappointed me so far, but I do keep hoping.”

Hannibal would like to stop to study everything more closely, but Will doesn’t slow down. They stop barely long enough in the two parlors for Hannibal to poke his head through the doors. “The mantles in both rooms - this one and the ladies’ parlor - are made in the Rococo Revival-style from Carrara marble, which as marble goes isn’t especially pretentious, but I suppose they had to make up for the cost of the chandelier somehow, right?”

The room Will leads him to holds a four poster bed, the frame made of elaborately carved mahogany. “Of course, the furniture is a *bit* newer than the house itself, the original European imports having been carried off during the war,” he says, as though pointing out a regrettably unforgivable flaw. There is a door in the bedroom that, Will tells him, leads out to the veranda.

It is not lost on Hannibal that, when Will drops his own bags off, he does not leave them in the master bedroom. Will's room also has a door that accesses the veranda, and they go outside though it.

Will takes a deep breath once they are out in the warm breeze. His eyes are sharp and glittery when he looks at Hannibal. "I know what you're thinking," he says. "'Poor little rich boy, can't do anything but complain since he doesn't know how good he has it.'"

Hannibal doesn't bother to deny it. The thought had crossed his mind.

When he doesn't rise to the bait, Will says, "No basement here, at least. That must come as something of a relief, doesn't it?"

"Anxiety makes you act ugly, Will."

He at least has the grace to look shamefaced. He bites his upper lip - biting back a sharper reply, Hannibal thinks - and after a pause says, "I know it. I do know it, I just don't know why you make me so damn anxious."

"When you talk about this house, it sounds like you're reading from the chart of a patient you dislike immensely."

"Let me show you something," he says, and leaves the veranda to walk out towards a large open patch of grassland and pecan trees. Hannibal follows him.

Beth, who they had left outside, comes around the side of the house, running full tilt to join them. She darts make and forth between Will and Hannibal as they walk.

A few hundred yards from the plantation house, Will stops and begins to poke through the grass. "They're here somewhere," he mutters, maybe to Hannibal or maybe to Beth but probably just to himself.

He finds what he's looking for and waves Hannibal over, then stoops and begins to pull up the grass growing around the object. Hannibal sees stone, imbedded deep in the dirt. "It's a foundation stone, see?" Will says. "You go a few paces in the right directions, you'll find the other three. This one counted as being nicer than most of the others - it was up off the ground, so it didn't flood, and it had a proper floor. Most of the others were just wood and dirt floors, and there's nothing left of them now."

He looks up at Hannibal. "Slave quarters."

Hannibal isn't really surprised. He'd understood that underpinned everything he'd seen so far, of course… but he is uneasy, coming so close to the thing.

Will straightens, brushing the dirt from his palms against the sides of his pants.

"This is a bad place," Will says. "It's a mouldering bastion of racist brutality, and every scrap of finery in that fucking house - every last eloquent inch, floor to ceiling, was bought with blood money and built by slave labor. And my daddy left it all to me, like I'd ever want anything he had to give.

“It’s all going up for sale when I die, I had the paperwork drawn up years ago - excellent pensions for the staff, with the balance of what the estate brings going to the UNCF. University scholarships for the descendants of the Black folks who built this place, or who built places like it, at any rate.”

Hannibal isn’t sure exactly what he should say. “That’s good,” seems like a safe bet, but Will waves his words away.

“It’s nothing - literally, less than nothing. I’m paying the debt with coin that never should have been mine in the first place, and it still won’t cover a fraction of what’s owed, but. I try to do what I can, you know?

“The place will probably end up another tacky B&B for northern Lookie Lous who get their rocks off to the whole antebellum aesthetic, but maybe that’s just fine. The family name’s gonna be buried with me, one way or the other.”

“When you get caught," Hannibal says evenly, "everything you've got is going to go into the victim compensation fund.”

“I’ll just have to make sure that I don’t get caught, then, won’t I?” he says, trying to play it off as a joke, but his laugh is strained. It’s not guilt over the killings that has him on edge, Hannibal thinks, or even fear of being caught per se, but rather an uneasy awareness of how the risks he takes when he kills might affect his plans and the lives of other people.

Hannibal doesn’t say anything.

“I can see you thinking,” Will says. “Tell me - how do you figure it? Does it make any difference if I serve on charity boards or if I’m socially conscious or if I damn racists? Is the weight of the bones buried in the back field lessened because they came exclusively from white men?”

Hannibal knows that Will believes that he is mocking Hannibal. He also knows that Will is really asking, that even in his depredations he has felt compelled to weigh the power that his race and gender and class have given him, and that while part of him thinks that such considerations are in the context of serial murder entirely ludicrous, just as big a part of Will hangs his concept of himself as anything other than a total monster on his ability to negotiate these concerns while exercising enough self-control to adhere to the idiosyncratic set of values that he has put a great deal of consideration into building.

“I’m struck, sometimes,” Hannibal says, “by how my own sense of ethics can extend so far in one direction when it is entirely absent in respect to other situations. I’ve wondered if an excess of one can mitigate a lack in other regards.”

“Go on,” Will says, face naked in his eagerness, and it comes to Hannibal that Will is looking towards him to answer questions about himself that he has not been able to solve by himself, just as Hannibal has been looking to Will for the same since the first time he entered Will’s office. It seems possible to Hannibal that Will has been doing so for a long time now.

“Where does that sense of ethics come from? Is it early training, a reaction to or against some experience, or something entirely different? I know, for example, that there is nothing in the world that could induce me to harm a child, and I know this with a certainty, but where did that inhibition come from? Does it stem from the time I spent with my sister or the manner in which I lost her, or did I learn it through caring for the younger children at the orphanages, or is it something innate to me, a fluke of my personality that’s gifted me an enduring soft spot when so much else has felt hard from the beginning or else become calloused?

“And yet, I understood perfectly well at the time that the two men who I killed were once someone’s children - the first one was barely grown, at that - but I didn’t hesitate then and probably will not hesitate if I am given another chance. Where, then, does the line between an unacceptable and an acceptable target lie for me, and by whom was it drawn?”

Will’s eyes are intent and very large. He is nodding.

“I don’t have an absolute answer,” Hannibal continues, and when Beth flops down in front of him, tired out from her run, he crouches to stroke the fur along her spine.

“I think that the bad and the good - or, anyway, the effort to be as good as you can be, within the context of the weight of history and the lingering effects of oppressive social systems. Those are two separate things, Will. Neither cancels the other out, but neither can you pay for the bad with the good - especially when the good is, as you said, only a small step towards taking responsibility for the legacy you’ve inherited, like it or not.”

Will wets his lips. “That’s about how I weighed it.”

When they are walking back to the house, Will asks him, “What about your folks? Old world peasant stock, only one or two generations off the land - that sort of thing, yeah? Nothing in your family tree to feel badly about.”

“As far I can remember,” Hannibal allows. “But Will, I don’t remember much.”

It’s quiet in the parlor after dinner, the two of them sitting there together while a fire burns in the hearth. Will has his bourbon, which he swirls gently in the tumbler now, watching how the firelight reflects off the cut crystal, seeming to light the amber liquid with a warm glow, but Hannibal is drinking wine.

It’s an excellent vintage, the bottle that Will found for him, and he’s pleased by how clearly Hannibal is able to appreciate it, despite a relative unfamiliarity with such high ticket items. His pleasure in the wine almost takes away the sting of annoyance Will felt at how closely Hannibal monitored him while he was making dinner.

Will supposes that he can expect to eat a lot of fowl in the future, at least for as long as this goes on. He’s troubled by how badly he wants it to last.

Beth is asleep on the floor beside Hannibal’s chair, where he can easily reach down to pet her, a situation that Hannibal is currently availing himself of.

“I think,” Will says, faintly buzzed and pleasantly bemused, “that this is the first time in two and a quarter centuries that a dog has been allowed inside this house. But what the hell, right?”

The truth is that he invited the dog inside to please Hannibal. The lanky pup has practically velcroed herself to his side almost from the start. Will would be jealous if he didn’t have another dozen hounds.

Another truth; he’s at least a little jealous, regardless. It’s a comfortable sort of jealous, though, soft and without fangs.

“I like her,” Hannibal says, with frank honesty, and Will senses layers of surprise nestled in those three words.

“Would you like to keep her?” Will asks, not entirely on impulse. “You can if you like - I have plenty of others, and in all honesty I’ve suspected for a little while now that she’s a bit too sweet natured for the work she’s meant to do.”

It’s frustrating, seeing the way that Hannibal pauses to check if Will’s playing some game, even if the evaluation only takes a fraction of a second, but he can’t pretend that it’s entirely unearned.

“I’m not sure,” Hannibal says, hesitating. “I don’t think I’d know what to do with a dog.”

That is, Will feels certain, as good as a *yes* , but he doesn’t pressure Hannibal.

“Just think about it for a little while,” Will tells him.

Chapter End Notes

Much of the description of the house was based on the the Myrtles Plantation, and I drew heavily from the wikipedia page and official website of said plantation.

Current chapter count reflects my current outline, but we've seen how these things like to grow, haven't we?

Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It would be easy for Hannibal to attribute his restful night to the feather pillows and soft hand-stitched quilt, identical enough to those that graced the bed in Will's basement that they might have been sewn by the same hands, but he knows that there's more to it than that. He knows that his instinct for self-preservation is strong, and it reassures him that twice now he's had such an easy time sleeping under the same roof with Will. It helps him to believe that he's on the right path.

Yet the instant he sees Will, seated at the kitchen table and glaring daggers at the newspaper spread open in front of him, Hannibal knows that something is wrong. The tension in Will's body is visible, even from the kitchen doorway, there in the set of his jaw and way he drums the fingers of one hand against the surface of the table in a frustrated rhythm before balling itself up into a white-knuckled fist.

Hannibal hesitates, concerned that he might somehow be the cause of Will's barely contained rage or else that he might present a convenient target on which to vent it, but then he steps into the kitchen.

"Did I miss breakfast?" he asks, knowing that he didn't.

There's irritation in Will's face when he looks up at Hannibal, but it's a distracted sort of irritation, lacking in any active anger, so Hannibal knows at least that he is not the direct source of the problem.

"We can get something on the road," Will says.

Hannibal frowns. "What's going on?"

"It's nothing," Will says, but he won't meet Hannibal's eyes. His hands are fidgety, and Will twines his fingers together and sits them firmly on top of the newspaper.

He tries again. "Listen - it's nothing, really, but I need some space here for a little bit. I'm just going to drive you up to Baton Rouge for the night. I'll put you up in a real nice hotel - you can have a good time, alright? - and then I'll be back for you in the morning."

"Why?" Hannibal says, though he knows the answer already. After everything that he's learned about Will, it's surprising that he is still capable of being disappointed in the man, and yet here they are.

"I need to do something."

Hannibal feels himself getting angry. "You don't *need* to do anything. You want to."

“No, you’re wrong. I do need to. I’m not trying to be inconsiderate, Hannibal. Something came up and I have to take care of it.”

“What came up?” he demands, knowing they both know that he already knows.

“You asked me to promise that I wouldn’t discuss these matters with you, and you will recall that I agreed.” As though to dismiss Hannibal, Will returns his gaze to the paper.

“Oh, go to hell,” Hannibal says, and snatches the paper from him.

It’s easy to find the article Will’s fixated on - he’s marked key passages in red ink.

Hannibal skims the article; it’s about a pending trial for a judge who has been accused of taking kickbacks to send runaways and juvenile delinquents to what had been billed as a private youth rehabilitation center, but which turned to have more in common with a work camp.

He tosses the paper back at Will, disgusted. “This is a put on. You listened to what I said about feeling protective toward children, and you trolled through the papers until you found something that you thought would pull at me, then you put on this whole act so it would look like my own idea when I agreed.”

“I really didn’t,” Will says, and he sounds so uninvested in the accusation that Hannibal nearly believes him. “Trust me when I say this has nothing to do with you, Hannibal. The hotel -”

“Piss on the hotel. The man is going to trial. There’s no reason for you to get involved.”

“You really think a blue-blooded old-money judge is going to be held responsible, when ninety percent of the kids he fucked over aren’t white and they’re all dirt fucking poor? Sorry to be the one to tell you this, Hannibal, but you ain’t from around here.”

“Will -”

Will holds the paper up and shoves it in Hannibal’s face. It’s so close that his eyes can barely focus on the picture of the work camp as Will jabs at it with his finger. “This is a slave plantation, do you understand that? This is Angola built small, right here in this parish, and this sonofabitch has been selling children.”

Hannibal doesn’t say anything. He’s thinking hard.

“He knew my old man. If I come around, tell him I know something that will help him out but that no one can know that we met… He’ll take that bait. He’ll bite.”

“You want to run him down with the dogs.”

“You’re damn right I do,” Will says, and Hannibal recognizes the snarl that curls Will’s lip as his own.

The decision comes to Hannibal quickly. “I'll come with you.”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Because I don’t need your help. And because you’d hold it against me later - you already aren’t 100% convinced that I’m not trying to play you.”

The type of rage brewing in Hannibal now is not at all safe, and he knows this but struggles to stymie it. The sense of rejection bites hardest, but he is nearly as angry at himself for having offered and for feeling so disappointed at having been turned down. And he’s deeply frighten, too, by the knowledge that he would easily have gone through with it had Will accepted the offer - and by how badly he wants, now, to find some way to force Will to change his mind.

“I am sorry, Hannibal,” Will says, “And I’ll make it up to you - we can stay here an extra night if you want, whatever you’d like to do.”

Hannibal is thinking, *I volunteered to help kill a man in cold blood, and I am ready to explode because he told me no.* The thought shakes him so deeply that it takes him a few moments to process what Will has said.

By the time he looks up to meet Will’s eyes, Hannibal has made up his mind.

He supposes that Will can read it all in his face, because Will’s own face pales. There is pain in Will’s eyes, and not a little fear. Half an hour ago, Hannibal might have found that gratifying.

“That’s not a good idea,” Hannibal tells him. It’s a struggle to keep his voice steady, but he imagines that if he were to lose control now his words might crack to pieces like glass and cut them both even more deeply than they are already bound to do, and so he tries. “This was a mistake, Will. It would be best if we returned to Baltimore as soon as possible. I shouldn’t be around you.”

Chapter End Notes

> the situation with the judge was vaguely inspired by the "kids for cash" case from a few years back, when it came out that two Pennsylvanian judges had taken kickbacks from the owner of two for-profit juvenile detention centers, resulting in the wrongful jailing of as many as 2,000 children.
>
> https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kids_for_cash_scandal

Chapter 8

Will puts the Fury into park in the Hotel Indigo's drop-off zone. A bellhop with a copper luggage cart begin to move in their direction, but Will makes direct eye contact with him and gives a sharp shake of his head, and the man in his neat uniform retreats.

He turns to Hannibal. "Don't you go and disappear on me while I'm gone, alright?" Will says. He wants it to sound funny, a ironic acknowledgment of the difficulties of the situation, as well as a way to communicate his fear that Hannibal might do just that without seeming too soft or needy. Without begging.

But Hannibal doesn't take it that way Will wants him to. "I'm getting pretty damned sick of your threats," he says, and Will gets a sinking feeling in the pit of his belly because he ought to have predicted that Hannibal would hear it that way - the man is already seeing red and is prone to projection, so almost anything Will had to say was likely to be read as aggressive.

"Hannibal... Christ, that wasn't a threat," Will says, and he finds it impossible to keep the frustration out of his voice, because he knows that he's fucking up but can't seem to stop. He knows that he should back down - cancel his plans or else tell Hannibal that he can come hunting with him after all - and he knows with just as much certainty that he will do neither of these things.

It is not in Will to let go of the simmering rage that the story about the judge invoked in him without first acting on those emotions, not when it strikes so close to home and so close to the bone - he will drown in the turmoil it has provoked in him otherwise. And he is absolutely certain, were he to extend an invitation to Hannibal now, it would be rejected violently and without equivocation.

If I start to cry, Will thinks, *I might need to kill us both right here out of pure embarrassment.*

"Do you know what this is?" Will asks Hannibal, and at first he means to walk Hannibal calmly and gently through his own emotions, which Will knows have confused him; there is in Hannibal so much hurt and anger and self-loathing, all tangled up together with desperate longings and a sort of barely acknowledged loneliness that is almost hideous in the depth of its need, and all of it amounts to more complications than anyone could by themselves resolve.

That is what Will means to do - to help Hannibal - but so many things are at stake here, and the fear takes him by the throat and he feels it turn him ugly, and instead of using his insight as a surgeon might use a scalpel to excise a tumor he slashes as wildly as a terrified man attempting to defend himself with a pocket knife.

So he repeats, "Do you know what this is? It's jealousy, Hannibal. You are jealous because you expected to have my undivided attention, and it is so *stupid* for you to feel that way because -" but Hannibal is already gone, unfolding himself from the car and slamming the door behind himself and walking away in long measured strides with the overnight bag slung over his shoulder before Will can say anything else, and maybe that is for the best, because

though what he told Hannibal had been the truth it was only a fraction of it, and twisted so dramatically out of shape to give it a sharp point to cut with as to make it entirely useless for them both.

“I can fix this later,” Will tells himself, and bites the knuckle of his index finger anxiously as he pulls back out onto the road, because he is badly afraid that, one way or another, there will be no *later* for the two of them.

Chapter 9

Hannibal is restless in the hotel room, but he doesn't go out.

It would be too easy, the way he feels now, to wash up in some overcrowded downtown bar where he would, more likely than not, end up using his fists on some conveniently obnoxious stranger.

He would prefer to stay out of jail, at least for as long as he can.

I could catch a felony charge just for sitting here twiddling my thumbs, he thinks.

If Will gets caught offing a judge, the prosecutor's office will hit him and everyone vaguely associated with him with everything they can. Accomplice liability. Aiding and abetting.

Soon, it might be accessory after the fact, but he supposes he's already racked up at least three potential accessory murder charges for failing to report what Will told him about his busy two weeks following Hannibal's release/escape from the basement. Four, if the individual who contributed the "pork loin" Will fed him was counted.

Hannibal wonders if Will would implicate him.

He wonders who a jury would believe, if it came down to his word against Will's.

The mini bar is well stocked. He decides to avail himself of it.

When he's drunk enough to remember how hungry he is, Hannibal finds the room service menu. There's no prices printed in the menu, but Hannibal isn't especially surprised by that.

He remembers seeing the price of the room when he checked in; just shy of five hundred dollars, and he'd been horrified almost to the point of laughing in the desk clerk's face at the idea that Will had sprung for such an extravagancy simply for the sake of keeping him pacified and out of the way for the night.

The room service bill eats up another Benjamin and change - or else it would, if Hannibal paid in cash rather than charging it to the room. He looks at the slip that the bellhop hands him and then back at the bellhop and tells him, "Well, at least it isn't people," and writes in a fifty dollar tip to thank the man for having the good manners to refrain from looking at him like he might need his head examined.

It's only after the expansive meal is laid out before Hannibal that it occurs to to him that Will will likely be pleased when he learns that Hannibal felt comfortable enough to treat himself on Will's tab. He'd been acting on spite when he placed the order, and the realization that even such a petty act of rebellion won't land a blow makes him feel small and bitterly disappointed.

The realization ruins his appetite, but he can't abide the idea of wasting so much food, so he eats anyway.

It is nearly 3am when his cellphone rings.

He hadn't been sleeping, but when he sees that it is Will calling he debates pretending that he is. But that seems potentially dangerous for a number of different reasons, so he answers.

"Will."

"Are you alone?"

Hannibal wants to get angry at that. *Who the fuck would I be with, when you dumped me in a strange city to go play your ugly little games?* he wants to demand.

But there is broken glass in Will's voice, and hearing that makes Hannibal as frightened as he is capable of being.

"Yes," he says, and hears the fear stark in his own voice. "Will -"

"Please meet me in the lobby," Will says, and the pain in his voice is bad. It is very bad for Hannibal, hearing it, and not understanding its cause makes it worse. "Come as quickly as you can, Hannibal. I… please hurry."

It could be some kind of trick, but Hannibal knows it isn't.

"I'm coming," Hannibal says, and pockets the key card on the way out the door.

Chapter 10

Hannibal's eyes find Will within seconds of his having stepped out of the elevator.

Will sees him too, and starts across the lobby in Hannibal's direction, and he is such a good actor that for a few moments even Hannibal is fooled into thinking that he is okay, despite what he knows.

He doesn't have many tells. His shoulders are stiff under the leather barn jacket, but otherwise Will's carriage and gait are normal. There is a streak of mud on the white bandage that still covers his cheek, but otherwise he is clean and reasonably neat, his hair slicked back. Will's expression is placid, blank in a nonthreatening sort of way.

He is very pale, though, and a sheen of sweat coats his skin, making his face shine. His eyes are glassy. Even from several yards away Hannibal can smell the blood on him, though he can't see it.

There's a small duffle bag in Will's hand, and when they draw together Hannibal reaches for it. Will hands it over without resistance. It's not very heavy.

Hannibal follows Will back the way he'd just come, to the elevators. He holds his silence, watching the few inhabitants of the lobby surreptitiously to see if they have attracted any attention. None of the stragglers from the hotel bar give them a second look.

The clerk at the desk smiles at Will and Hannibal as they pass, and Will smiles back warmly. Hannibal knows that his own face is rigid, probably far more conspicuously unusual than Will's, but he can't chance his real feelings slipping through if he loosens up.

It's only when the elevator doors close behind them that Will begins to sag, and once he lets the mask drop he begins to unravel very quickly. It is like watching a timelapse film of a cut flower wilting.

Will staggers to the corner of the elevator and leans against the safety rail, clutching it. His head hangs limp, forehead resting against the cool metal paneling.

The closed space smells like a butcher's shop.

Hannibal wets his lips nervously then lifts a hand to place it between Will's shoulders, and Will sees the movement reflected in the elevator's shiny paneling and says in a rush, "*Don't do that*," his voice ragged with panic and his face already caught in a rictus of pain in anticipation of being ignored, and Hannibal's hand falls back to his side bonelessly.

When the elevator dings, Will turns unsteadily and tries to smile up at Hannibal through the sweat-moisten hair that hangs over his face.

Hannibal sees Will's adam's apple bob when he swallows. "May I have your arm?" he asks, voice shaky. Hannibal's brain stalls for an instant, trying to process the request, but after a

beat he turns and offers his forearm. Will leans against Hannibal, hands clinging so tightly that it hurts.

This is, Hannibal realizes as he helps Will down the hall, the only time that they have been so physically close for any reason other than to hurt one another.

A couple passes them in the hallway, and Will lifts his head to give them the best smile he is able to manage. It's ghastly - too broad and thin, like a slash wound that runs from ear to ear, and it trembles on his face. "Food poisoning," he tells them apologetically, as they hurry past, and Hannibal can't tell if they believe the lie or not.

Once they are in the room, Will gestures vaguely towards the bed, and Hannibal walks him to it and stands stiffly as Will lowers himself onto it.

Hannibal turns away and walks to the door, engaging all of the locks and moving the security guard into place. This will make no difference if things fall apart, he knows, but it is an excuse to give himself a few moments away from Will in which to compose himself.

"Could you get me some water?" Will asks, voice barely loud enough for Hannibal to make out the words. Hannibal ducks into the bathroom and fills a glass.

When he comes back to Will, he sees the blood dripping out from under the edge of Will's jacket and pooling on the top quilt.

Hannibal feels his heart skip a beat and then begin to pound faster than it ought to.

Will has already seen the blood, and now he sees Hannibal see it. "Just in time," he says, trying that awful smile again. "I knew I was bleeding through the bandages."

Hannibal gives him the glass and Will takes it with both hands. He drinks the entire thing down without pause.

"Is he dead?"

"Hell yeah he is," Will says, vicious despite everything, and utterly unrepentant. "He's all tore up. Dogs didn't want to let up on him and I wasn't apt to make them. He wouldn't be fit for stew meat, the way they worked him over."

Hannibal closes his eyes, trying to keep his frustration in check. "Where is the body?"

Will's eyes cut sideways. "Still on my property," he admits. "I had to leave it where it was - but don't worry, no one's going to find it."

Will sets the glass on the bed and starts to work on the buttons of his jacket. His hands are shaky, uncooperative, and Hannibal crouches down and brushes them out of his way before beginning to undo the buttons himself.

"What happened?"

Will lets out all the air in his lungs in a long sigh. “He outsmarted the dogs, the son of a bitch - and me too, I guess. I don’t know how, doubled back on the trail and climbed a tree, maybe, but he got behind me somehow -”

He hisses as Hannibal starts to work the jacket off over his shoulders, but wiggles to help Hannibal remove it. In that moment, he reminds Hannibal of the very small children that he’d helped to care for when he was young, the ones that weren’t old enough to get a coat on or off on their own, but who would hold their arms up to make the task easier.

The back of Will’s shirt is soaked with blood, and Hannibal takes a folding knife from his pocket to cut it away - no point in having Will wiggle out of it when it’s obviously ruined.

Will stalls him with a hand on his wrist. “Mess,” he says. “Mind the mess. There’s a plastic sheet in the bag.”

While Hannibal is taking it out, Will says, “We can take the bed linens with us, and they’ll just assume I’m a thief and bill it to my card. Blood stains on the mattress might be more troublesome, though.”

He sits with his eyes closed while Hannibal spreads the plastic across the bed, then slides his butt into it.

Woozy,” he says, probably to himself, as Hannibal leans over him and slits his shirt down the back. Will blinks rapidly and clutches the edge of the bed as though the room is spinning.

Next, Hannibal cuts away the thick bandages that Will had wrapped around his shoulders and torso. It’s a mess, beneath them. His back is a mess, marked by half a dozen jagged slashes of varying depth and length.

“He found a broken bottle, I guess. I don’t know,” Will says. The words come in little bursts between short, shallow breaths. “Sliced me all up before the dogs pulled him off."

He squeezes his eyes shut again, and Hannibal can see him trying to *will* the dizziness away. Sweat coats his body, drips from curls that hang limply over his his eyes and around his ears.

Hannibal remembers how stoically Will took the beating that he’d given him, how after a certain point Will hadn’t even seemed to be present in the moment, let alone effected by the pain. Hannibal is scared all over again, seeing how different this is, how helpless Will has been made.

Reading the gashes is easy, for someone of Hannibal’s experience. The stab wound on the front of Will’s chest, just above the clavicle, will have been the first of the series; the man had been trying for Will’s throat, but Will must have shifted just in time to dodge a fatal injury, or else did something else to throw his aim off.

That injury sprouted a long slash, like the tail of a comet running up and over Will's shoulder, and Hannibal guesses that it was made at the same time that the judge was driving Will to the ground with the force of his own momentum and greater weight.

The judge had fallen on top of Will, probably on the back of his thighs, because if he'd had a vantage point closer to Will's neck he would have made another attempt at Will's jugular. Instead, he had stabbed and slashed at Will's back while Will tried to scramble out from under him. There were scratches on the back of one of Will's arms, where one of the hounds had braced a paw against Will's flesh - quite unintentionally, Hannibal is sure - while pulling the judge off of him.

The wound on Will's clavicle has been stitched up, but the others are open, the deeper cuts still bleeding. A piece of broken glass the size of a child's finger is embedded in the meat between his shoulder blades.

Will turns his head and looks up at Hannibal. His smile is apologetic. "I just need some help is all," he says. "I'd do it myself, but I can't reach."

"Will -" Hannibal begins, and has no idea what to say next.

The point, in any case, is moot, because while Hannibal is hunting for the right words Will slips into unconsciousness, his head rolling back on his neck as his body goes as limp as a puppet that's had its strings cut.

Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It’s cold and dark and terribly lonesome where Will has been, and he fights to rise up from unconsciousness like a drowning man trapped beneath icy waves. There’s pain here, in the waking world - a lot of it - but at least that pain is real. It’s something he can hold on to.

There are hands moving against his bare skin, steady and cautious and gentle, and where they touch him the burning between his shoulder blades and down his spine is punctuated by a sharp sting and a tugging sensation.

For a long time, Will can’t think of who it might be that’s touching him like that, but it doesn’t worry him. It’s nice, despite the pain that comes with it, but it’s even nicer when one of the hands wanders to touch Will’s hair, running fingers through it. The hand cups the back of Will’s head, just where the skull meets the cervical vertebrae, and the thumb traces the line of his jaw.

Will can tell how furtive the touch is, he senses in a hazy way a knowledge on the part of the hand’s owner that he is taking something that isn’t his. But the touch makes Will feel grounded and safe, so he leans into it and smiles.

I’m being taken care of, Will thinks. *This is what being cared for feels like.*

Memory had nearly failed.

Will takes care of his patients with an intense focus. Often, he helps strangers, in small casual ways or in charitable contributions of his time or money to nonprofit organizations.

He does not allow others to take care of him. It stings like pity, and he doesn't trust the intentions of those who try. Will understands perfectly well that helping someone is often just another means of exercising control.

This isn’t too awful, though.

When Will opens his eyes and shifts his head to look up at Hannibal a flood of relief washes across his face, but it disappears an instant later, drying up to leave his expression as blank and featureless as a sand dune.

Will remembers how eager Hannibal had been to open up during their sessions, the desperation he had to lay down his masks and be seen, especially once he began to dare to believe that Will would accept what he had to show.

The desperation is still there now, but Hannibal has shunted it from Will’s sight, unwilling to give up anything else that might be used as ammunition against him.

Seeing that makes Will feel ashamed of himself.

“You found the medical kit,” Will observes, understanding now that the sting and tug that he’d felt on his skin was Hannibal stitching up the gashes on his back.

Hannibal inclines his head minutely - a nod.

“Do you know what you’re doing?” Will asks. He tries to just ask it - no provocation or false cajoling gentleness. He thinks that he does okay.

“I had a vague idea,” Hannibal says, but there isn’t much in his voice to indicate that he doubts his own abilities. “I’ve only just finished. The bleeding has more or less stopped, but I don’t know what the scarring will look like unless you have someone more qualified redo the job soon. I’m sure that there’s probably a technique to minimize scarring, but I don’t know it. It’s been the better part of thirty years since I sewed up a cut, and never anything this extreme.”

“That so?” Will says, inviting a story - an excuse to hear more of Hannibal's voice.

“My mentor - the doctor at the old castle, yes? Dr. Trevino - he didn’t have many resources to draw on, so he wasted nothing. His view was that if I could be taught to be useful then I should be put into service, regardless of my age or lack of formal medical training.”

“Good old Soviet practicality,” Will says.

Hannibal’s smile is like a poorly wired lamp; a moment of flickering light, gone dark in the next instant. “I learned a number of skills from him.”

He’s thoughtful and silent for a little while after that, but when Will runs a dry tongue over cracked lips, Hannibal says, “You must be thirsty.”

“Parched,” Will agrees.

He drinks the first glass of water that Hannibal brings him quickly, though doing so is awkward while laying on his belly. Will asks for a second, but in the time that it takes Hannibal to walk to the sink and back, he falls asleep.

Hannibal sits the glass of water on the bedside table, and stands listening to Will’s respiration. His breathing is, perhaps, a bit more shallow than it ought to be, the slight rise and fall of his shoulder blades with each new breath slightly hurried, but there seems to be no immediate threat.

This is the sleep of the utterly exhausted, not another blackout. It would be better for Will to be in a hospital - a blood transfusion would do him a lot of good, for a start - but if that were a possibility then he never would have looked to Hannibal for help in the first place, but all and all Hannibal does think things will be okay.

Hannibal’s exhausted himself. It’s foolish, he knows, but he would like to crawl into the bed beside Will. But if he did so, he might wake Will up, or even hurt him - just his weight shifting on the mattress would cause Will’s body to shift, and that motion would be painful.

Hannibal is prone to nightmares, too, and it would be an ugly thing if while flailing in his sleep he were to strike Will, especially across the back.

And also, he is afraid of being unwelcomed there. There's plenty of ways that he could justify it - there's more than enough room in the king sized bed for the two of them to keep to their own personal space, and no other proper place for Hannibal to sleep, and anyway, it's *his* bed, even if Will paid for it - but he knows that Will could easily tear all those rationalization away to expose the vulnerability at the heart of his desire to be closer to Will, and Hannibal is worn out with letting Will hurt him.

He settles into one of the room's plush chairs instead, and is asleep within a matter of minutes.

The sun is bright behind the curtains when Will wakes. His body feels like it's made of rotting driftwood, stiff and dead and likely to crumble apart under the slightest pressure, and when he tries to stretch enough parts of him register their displeasure that he can't keep the groan from slipping through his lips.

Hannibal is there in a matter of seconds, going from sleep to wakefulness and the chair to the bedside so silently that Will can hardly credit the reality of it, though he's seen how quickly Hannibal can move before.

It's hard to sit up, but Hannibal offers him an arm on which to brace himself and Will makes it. Hannibal draws away as soon as Will is upright. He sits on the edge of the bed with his head hanging down for a long time, clutching the quilt in his fists and waiting for the room to stop spinning.

Without looking up, Will can feel Hannibal's eyes on him, watching.

Even when he feels steady enough to lift his head, it is hard for Will to meet Hannibal's eyes. He looks around the room instead, taking in the small empty bottles from the minibar standing in orderly lines and the room service dishes and platters stacked neatly on one corner of the desk. From where Will is sitting the plates look pristine, and he suspects that Hannibal washed them in the bathroom sink before stacking them - the man can't abide a mess.

He wonders if Hannibal knows that he is meant to leave the dishes outside of the room, on the hallway floor.

"Look like you had a good time," Will says. "I'm glad, Hannibal."

"It was miserable," Hannibal says flatly.

"Oh."

The silence comes creeping back. Will knows that he needs to speak into that silence - that it might be now or never, but it is hard to know where to start. His head feels like it weighs

about fifty pounds, but the feeling in his chest is worse; fear and shame squirm there, crowding out his heart.

It's difficult for him, but he tries to meet Hannibal's gaze.

"I haven't been good to you," Will begins. His throat is so dry, and the words want to stick there, but he forces them free. It comes with a tearing sensation inside of himself, saying these things out loud. "I haven't treated you right, and I know it. I don't understand why you're still here."

"You know how I feel," Hannibal says. He holds himself ramrod straight as he says this - steel in the spine, defiant, and in seeing that defiance Will is acutely aware of his own profound weaknesses.

"I do," Will admits. It seems stupid now, sitting half naked and nearly helpless in a room that reeks of his own blood, to continue to lie about that, either to Hannibal or himself.

"But I'm not like you, Hannibal. I don't share your hunger to be understood, and I never wanted for you to see me, not the way that I really am. It scares me - more than I can say, more than I could begin to articulate."

He feels the threat of tears stinging at his eyes again, and it is so difficult, even now, when he is trying to face himself and own up to his own behavior, to keep himself from twisting the emotions that are cutting at him around and using them as a weapon against Hannibal.

But Will keeps going. "I don't know if I can do this. I don't know if I can… stomach being loved, not by you or anyone else. And Hannibal, I don't know if I can love you back - not in a way that's honest and good at the same time, not in a way that you deserve.

"I'm willing to try. I don't know what trying will do to me, either, but I am willing to try if that's what you want to do.

"Is it?" He hears his voice turn small on those last two words. Layers of fears, one on top of the other.

It's not joy or disappointment or anger that shows on Hannibal's face now, and it's not rejection. His face is tight with determination and with certainty - though certainty in what Will could not even begin to guess.

When Hannibal nods his assent the movement is almost imperceptible. "Try, Will," he says. "Try, and we'll see."

Chapter End Notes

Here ya'll go, the Will Has A Feeling Chapter I've been promising.

Not sure yet if the next one is the last chapter or if we have a few more to go.

Regardless of how that shapes out, I'm planning two more multi-chapter fics for this AU, and am very excited about that.

Chapter 12

The doctor with his discrete luggage full of medical supplies reeks of hogs, and Hannibal is torn between a desire to retreat from the smell and to stay on guard near Will, in case the stranger should be malicious or incompetent.

The man appeared a few hours after Will placed a phone call, and Hannibal watches him now as he assembles the I. V. pole that he's taken from his bags and hangs the blood bag for transfusion on it. Hannibal tries to catch Will's eyes while the doctor is inserting the needle, and Will gives him a short smile calculated to reassure.

It does nothing to decrease the sense of distaste that the doctor provokes in him, but Hannibal is nonetheless pleased when the majority of the stitch work that he'd done is deemed good enough to remain in place. The doctor only redoes a few small sections. Will's had something for the pain, by then, and he wrinkles his nose and drums his fingers against the mattress impatiently while the gloved hands touch him.

Will rolls onto his side stiffly once the doctor has left and regards Hannibal. "Glad it's just us again?"

"I wish these windows opened. Not to put too fine a point on it, but he smelled like pig shit."

"Did he?" Will asks, and Hannibal can see that he accepts Hannibal's evaluation, though he had not himself caught the scent. Hannibal can't suppress the slight jab of disappointment; many times, especially when he was young, Hannibal has been scolded or criticized for an oversensitivity to smells.

Somehow, he'd hoped that Will might have the same keen nose.

"Well," Will continues, "from that we can derive where his last house call was. Cordell specializes in the discrete treatment of spoiled rich boys who have gotten themselves or others into potentially embarrassing situations." Hannibal associates Will's tone with a sort of irony that's an imperfect mask for the self-loathing that sits beneath it, and for that reason he knows it to be dangerous. But this time, at least, it's not Hannibal who becomes the target of the anger resting uncomfortably beneath the surface.

"Mason Verger, heir to an empire of pork, is very prone towards such troubles," Will continues, "far more than I've ever been. I'd imagine that cleaning up his messes is nearly a full time job for Cordell. It's a lucky thing that he was available to see me, especially on such short notice."

The ironic humor, sharp as it was, disappears. A blink of the eye, and Will is deadly serious and thrumming with rage. If he had the choice, Hannibal thinks that he likes Will better this way. "I've treated Mason's little sister for years. And I've been on the family farm often enough to have a good sense of what goes on there, never mind what she's told me in confidence.

“Mason’s one pig that I’d dearly love to run down. You would too, I think, given your investment in protecting children.”

Hannibal looks out the window. He thinks that might be an offer, but he doesn’t ask and Will doesn’t press.

Chapter 13

It's three days until Will is well enough to go out into the woods with Hannibal to retrieve the body.

Hannibal is anxious to have the matter taken care of, but Will knows that there's no need to rush. "I'm the only person in twenty years to walk through those woods and come out alive," Will tells him. "No one is going to find it."

He demurs when Hannibal suggests that he might go out alone, arguing - more or less truthfully - that it would be impossible for Will to give him comprehensive directions, and that if Hannibal were to get lost then they would be in real trouble.

Probably one of the older dogs could lead him to the body, but Will doesn't entirely trust any of his trained hunters alone with Hannibal. In any case, Hannibal doesn't suggest that route and Will does not offer it as an option.

The truth is that Will wants to be with Hannibal when he sees what's left of the judge. He wants to see how Hannibal takes it.

Will watches Hannibal during those three days, more intently than ever. He sees how much he frustrates Hannibal, and despite that frustration all the ways in which Hannibal would like to draw him closer. And too, how closely Hannibal holds those desires in check, his reluctance to be perceived as crowding Will.

It's clear, though, that Hannibal needs to be doing something that makes him feel useful, and it's not hard to tempt him into kitchen. He takes it over with an aggressive enthusiasm that is only partially driven by a desire to monitor what ingredients go into their meals.

When he is feeling well enough to be out of bed Will watches him in the kitchen, turning his chair sideways before sitting down so the back won't press against his bandage dressings. There's a grace to the way Hannibal moves through the kitchen, a quiet flair that shows how much he enjoys what he is doing and the fact that Will is observing him doing it.

"You're good in the kitchen," Will tells him, one evening during dinner. "It's like you're in your natural element."

Hannibal doesn't answer, but Will can see him preening internally, delighted.

Despite his obvious discomfort at the ready way that Will spends money, there's something in Hannibal that draws him toward fine things. The cast iron cookware and pastry oven please him immensely. When he reaches into the freezer he always bipasses chicken in favor of the richness of duck or delicacy of quail.

Will can think of nothing more delightful than the possibility of encouraging the decadent steak buried in Hannibal to grow.

Will sits on the edge of his own bed and unbuttons his shirt, then shrugs it off gingerly.

Hannibal leans over him from behind and begins to peel away the bandages that dot Will's back.

It shouldn't hurt as much as it does - Will is fairly well doped up, and Hannibal works with a measured caution that is a more than serviceable substitution for natural gentleness, and the pain itself is laughably minor in comparison to the agony having broken glass embedded in the meat between his shoulder blades, but the pulling of the bandage tape so near tender wounded skin is somehow insult to injury.

The pain is difficult to deal with because Will resents it. He squirms, despite himself, and Hannibal braces one hand over Will's unwounded shoulder to hold him still. Sudden fear flutters inside of Will's chest like a trapped bird at the sense of being restrained, and is joined an instant later by a seething rage, and his first instinct is to turn his head and bite the hand that seeks to control him as hard as he can - to bite him hard and to keep on biting, to knock him on his back and climb on top of him and tear him apart with his teeth and his fingers, and -

And he closes his eyes and holds himself rigidly still until the impulse passes. It fades, leaves him feeling wrung out and grey, and in its wake Will's entire body begins to tremble. This is not the first time that Hannibal's touch has inspired such a reaction, but Will still has no idea what to do with it or the sharp sense of disgust at himself that it provokes.

Will decides to ride it out. He leans his cheek against Hannibal's knuckles.

"There's an intimacy to this, isn't there?" Will asks, and Hannibal hums softly in agreement and continues to work at the bandage tape.

The shaking hasn't stopped, but Will feels less worried about it now. He is thinking of lifting his hand and placing it over the one resting on his shoulder when he remembers the way Hannibal accused him of flooding himself - of forcing himself into situations that frighten or overwhelm him until he becomes numb to them - and he feels a spark of resentment kindle.

"Aren't you glad I got so tore up? Otherwise, you'd never have gotten a chance to -"

Will hisses as Hannibal yanks off a length of bandage tape.

"Cut it out," he tells Will.

"I'll cut *something*," Will mutters darkly.

Hannibal ignores him.

The last piece of bandage tape comes away with a sting.

Will feels Hannibal lean over his shoulder and breathe him in.

Will blinks. Then he lifts his head to look up at him. “Hannibal,” he says, using his mildest curious-therapist-voice, “why did you just smell me?”

Hannibal turns away, busying himself with unwrapping a roll of fresh bandage tape. When he answers there’s a note of embarrassment in his voice, an odd vulnerability. “There’s no infection,” he says.

It takes Will a second to work out how that relates to his question, and when he puts the pieces together it makes him want to laugh. He doesn’t, though - he keeps his voice serious. “I’m glad to hear it.”

They take the four-wheeler as far into the forest as it will go.

Will rides behind Hannibal on long seat, his arms snaked tightly around Hannibal’s waist and his knees against the backs of Hannibal’s thighs.

He tells himself that he doesn’t like the arrangement - that he would rather be driving, if the prospect of putting his shoulders into controlling the ATV or having Hannibal leaning against his wounded back wasn’t too daunting, but he doesn’t work too hard to convince himself. Even riding pillion, every turn and uneven bit of terrain inspires a new bolt of pain.

Eventually, the pines give way to scrubland, and they leave the ATV and walk, sticking to game trails as well as they can. Will’s tired already, but he knows this land and is proud to demonstrate that knowledge to Hannibal, so he keeps his head up and his stride steady as he leads the way.

When he sees the mess, Hannibal sighs.

Will supposes he can’t blame him. It’s pretty ugly, and it stinks - badly enough for Will to wrinkle his own nose as his normally sturdy stomach considers rebellion.

But it’s not the smell that seems to be bothering Hannibal as he spreads the tarp out on the ground next to the body to save Will from having to bend over.

“You can smell the pig on someone who hours ago had been in the same general vicinity of a hog farm, but this isn’t a problem?” Will asks, genuinely curious.

“You know how many crime scenes I’ve worked,” Hannibal says, perhaps a bit defensively. "I’ve done research on the Body Farm in Knoxville, as well. I’m used to this.”

He pauses, and Will sees him wet his lips. Hannibal looks up to meet his eyes. “That’s not true - I didn’t have to get used to it. It’s never really bothered me.” Hannibal hesitates. “Why do you think that might be?”

It’s the first time since his stay in Will’s basement that Hannibal has asked Will for help in understanding himself, and Will genuinely regrets not having an answer. “I’m not sure, Hannibal."

Will offers a piece of himself, since that's the only thing he has to offer. "It took me a bit of work to get used to it. But my old man had me out hunting when I was pretty young - cleaning game, skinning pelts, too. All of that was harder for me to learn to do."

Hannibal is pulling the first of a set of long rubber gloves over his hand, rolling it up to his elbow, and there is anger coming off of him in waves, nearly enough to knock Will back on his heels. The suddenness of it makes him feel small and desperate, reminds him of all the time he spent in these woods with his father and the quick way that the old man's rage could spike in response to something Will did or failed to do.

"What's the matter?" he asks Hannibal, and is revolted by the cringing whine that comes into his voice.

Hannibal looks at him with disgusted mystification. "This isn't an animal," he says, enunciating every syllable carefully, as though he thinks Will is incredibly stupid.

Will squares up, defiant despite - or maybe because of - the fear that's still clawing at him. "It's less than an animal," he snarls. "It's *nothing*."

"I could go to jail for helping you get rid this 'nothing,'" Hannibal says, his voice strangely calm. "If they decided that I helped you kill him, they could give me the needle."

That stops Will cold. The idea of Hannibal being lead to the padded cross and strapped down to be pumped full of poison blurs uncomfortable with his own lingering guilt at having drugged him, that night in his kitchen.

"No," he says. "No - because I would tell them. I'd tell them, Hannibal, that I did it by myself. Honestly, I would."

"What do you think your word is going to be worth, Will, when they get a look at the basement of your house in Baltimore? When they find what's in your freezer chest?"

"I'm not going to get caught," Will says. "So it doesn't matter."

He can see how bad it would look, though, how it would play in the press. The cannibalism would just be the cherry on top of a story so rich in its sordidness that the media could feast on for months - years, even. The headlines are easy to see; moneyed southern dandy seduces older man - a foreigner with a dark past - into a life of decadence and violence.

Is that what I'm doing to him? Will wonders.

"Everyone gets caught eventually," Hannibal says, and he sounds as tired as Will feels. "Put your gloves on and help me."

Will does what Hannibal asks.

What's left of the judge goes into the bayou, not far from where Will dump his father's body a quarter century earlier, and they go back to the house.

Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

After Hannibal sets his bag on the edge of the hotel bed and unclips Beth's leash from her collar, Will shows him how to set up the dog crate.

"She's young enough that she'll probably wake you up to go out during the night," Will warns him.

"That's all right," Hannibal says, "I'm a light sleeper."

That gives Will pause. It's been his experience that even when he was chained up in the basement, Hannibal slept like a baby, but Will can tell that he isn't lying - or at least, Hannibal doesn't think he's lying.

Will tries to swallow the lump in his throat, then he says, "Walk me with me down to my room." Hannibal looks at him oddly for a moment, but he nods in agreement.

When they draw near Will's room, he drops half a step behind Hannibal and puts a hand on the small of his back to guide Hannibal to the door.

"This is me," Will says, and keeps his hand just above the base of Hannibal's spine as he leans up and kisses him.

It is something that he has wanted to do very badly, but Will is scared of so many things and of himself most of all, and it takes all of the courage that he has.

Hannibal is quick as a copperhead snake. He pulls Will very close, and Will feels Hannibal curl his hand behind the back of his skull. The strength in that hand is inexorable, and when Will tries to pull away it holds him in place.

Panic erupts in Will's chest.

He bites down.

Hannibal hisses when Will's teeth sink into his flesh, but there is a stubbornness in him that keeps him from letting go of Will immediately.

When he does, Will skitters backwards until the hallway wall comes up against his back. He crouches, a predatory animal ready to pounce, and tilts his eyes up to watch Hannibal. Those eyes are wild, feral - terrified and vicious and hungry with longing.

He shows Hannibal his teeth, which are stained red with Hannibal's own blood.

It’s no soft nip that Will's given him, no love bite - Hannibal can feel the blood dripping from his torn lower lip and down his chin to stain the hallway’s cream-colored carpets.

If it had been in true earnest, Hannibal has no doubt that Will would have come away with a considerable piece of Hannibal’s flesh in his teeth, but it would nonetheless be foolish to pretend that he is safe.

Will has no hold over what he is feeling now, the heady jumble of panic and outrage and a dozen other conflicting impulses. He might do almost anything.

Hannibal advances on him, and Will neither pounces or flees. He presses his back against the wall as though he might sink into it, senseless to the pain doing this must be causing him. When Hannibal yanks him upright he can smell the terror bleeding from Will’s pores, the absolute certainty that Hannibal means to hurt him - that Hannibal will break him into pieces in punishment for what he’s done - and Hannibal leans in and kisses Will again, understanding now what he’d done wrong, and instead of trapping Will’s mouth against his own he lays his palm against Will’s cheek lightly and strokes the curl of his ear.

The kiss is softer this time, and when Will pulls back Hannibal doesn't stop him.

“I’m sorry,” Hannibal says, “I didn’t want to let go.”

“Unlock the door,” Will says, his own hands trembling violently as he presses the keycard into Hannibal’s hand, and Hannibal can feel the heat of Will’s breath slip under his shirt collar and burn his skin.

“Don’t try to hold me down,” Will says, speaking quickly as Hannibal climbs up on the bed to sit facing him. There's a shaky edge to Will’s voice, which sounds now slightly higher than usual. "Please understand - if I feel trapped I might hurt you," Will tells him, and his chest heaves between each word, short on breath.

Hannibal bows his head so its crown comes level with Will collarbone and allows Will to tangle jittery fingers in his hair while Hannibal’s own steady hands work carefully at the buttons of Will’s shirt.

“Hannibal,” Will says, the fingers in Hannibal’s hair pulling to bring him close enough for Will to press his forehead against Hannibal’s own. “Hannibal, I’m trying not to hurt you,” he says, and Hannibal feels against his own skin the beads of sweat breaking out on Will’s forehead. "Don't make me feel trapped. Please. Please don't."

And Hannibal, understanding that his life might be forfeit if he frightens Will now, says, “I know. I know, Will. I won’t.” And he says, “It’s alright, Will. You’re doing so well,” and pauses his work with the buttons as Will rakes Hannibal’s shirt up his back and tugs it off.

Will is saying, “Please be careful, Hannibal,” when the last button comes undone, and Hannibal waits patiently as Will shrugs the shirt off.

“*God*,” Will says, when Hannibal lays the flat of his palm against Will’s bare chest, and his entire body shudders. He strokes Will’s skin with the edge of his thumb, only the lightest of touches, and it is enough to turn Will’s already heavy breathing ragged. “Please,” Will begs, his fists white-knuckled from clutching the blankets. “I don’t want to hurt you - please just be so careful.”

Hannibal recognizes hunger when he sees it, understands Will’s reaction as something akin to the rebellion of a starving man’s belly when presented with too rich a meal. He wonders how long Will has gone without being touched like this.

Hannibal leans in and kisses the end of Will clavicle where it meets the ball of the shoulder, and his lower lip, which is still bleeding slowly, marks the skin there with red.

He lifts his head and kisses Will again, and he knows that Will can taste his blood and that the taste excites him because when Hannibal draws back Will’s hands skitter down Hannibal’s stomach and reach eagerly for his fly.

Hannibal brushes the fingers away gently. He takes Will’s hands in his own, but lightly, as though they are a moth that might be easily crushed. “Not yet.”

Will frowns. “Please,” he says. Not a plea this time.

The hands in Hannibal’s own are still trembling, more violently than ever, and the shuddering that strikes Will in waves that border on convulsions. There is no doubt in Hannibal’s mind that Will wants him, and that knowledge provokes a bright and shining sense of wonder within him. But what Will is doing now, he thinks, is a different type of flooding - not exactly akin to the killing but close - and that is not what Hannibal wants for either of them.

The smile on his own face feels soft and fond to Hannibal, even as he shakes his head. “Not tonight,” he says, and lets go of Will’s hands to lay back on the bed.

“Lay down with me,” Hannibal says, patting the place next to himself on the mattress. “I want to look at you - god, do you know how beautiful you are?”

Will smirks down at him, and feels in the vibrations of the mattress the low chuckle that rumbles out of Hannibal’s chest. “Of course you do, clever as you are.”

“I can’t barely credit how goddamned *sappy* you are,” Will tells him, but there’s no sharp edge to the words. Still moving stiffly from the ache in his back, Will stretches out beside Hannibal.

“Let me see your lip,” Will says, and winces when Hannibal hooks a finger in the edge of his mouth and pulls his lower lip down. “Ouch,” he hisses. “Let’s keep an eye on that, alright? No infections for either of us, knock wood...”

Hannibal is looking at him oddly - there is a shining in his eyes, a nakedness to the affection in his usually guarded face. *Was he that desperate for me to show concern for him again?*

Will wonders, and the guilt that invokes is far more acute than what he feels for having bitten Hannibal.

He reaches out and touches Hannibal's cheek, and the absolute bliss in Hannibal's face as he leans into the touch and nuzzles his hand is nearly enough to overwhelm Will completely.

Hannibal doesn't mean to sleep. He intends to get up and go back to his own room, if only because he remembers what Will said about Beth needing to be taken out.

But he drifts off into a deep sleep despite himself, and when he wakes he can see golden sunlight against his closed eyelids. He can feel Beth in the bed with them, too, her head resting on his ankle, can smell the fresh puppy scent of her. Will must have fetched her while he slept.

He can smell Will too, the fear stink from last night still clinging to his skin, but faded enough to feel like a distant memory, evocative but no longer distressing.

When Hannibal opens his eyes he sees that Will is watching him, his hooded eyes drowsy and fond. Hannibal smiles back at him before rolling out of the bed and heading for the bathroom.

Meeting his own expression in the mirror startles Hannibal, because for a moment he barely recognizes himself. He does not recall a time when he has ever looked so softly contented.

Chapter End Notes

Pretty pleased with myself TBCH. :)

Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

They have been back on the road for perhaps half an hour when Will says, “I can’t be your therapist anymore.”

Hannibal glances into the rearview mirror to look at him, stretched out on his side in the backseat with a pillow propped under his neck and another behind his butt - the pain is worse this morning, and Will is trying to go easy on himself as they have considerably more ground to cover today. It ought to be an invalid’s pose, positioned as gingerly as he is to keep from putting pressure on his wounded back and shoulders, but somehow Will manages to look appealingly languid.

“Officially, I mean. On paper. Not if we’re going to do this.”

“This?” Hannibal repeats, turning his eyes back to the road. He likes the way that the old muscle car drives, but it feels like a tremendous responsibility has been placed in his hands, as rare and valuable as the Fury is. Everything about Will feels that way, really.

“If we are going to be… friendly.”

“Will.”

In the passenger seat, Beth whines at his tone, and Hannibal takes one hand off the wheel to stroke her head, too annoyed to reflect on how quickly this action, like so many other things associated with Will, has become like second nature to him.

“See one another, then,” Will says. There is a long pause, in which Hannibal knows Will has stopped to wet his lips anxiously, though he doesn’t look in the mirror to check. “Date?” he offers.

Another pause, this one longer. “That is what we’re going to do, isn’t it?” Will asks, the slightest edge of trepidation in his voice.

Hannibal glances in the mirror again, knowing that Will can see his expression reflected there. When Will goes on, it is with the cheerful easy confidence of a man who knows himself to be on solid ground.

“So then. Since we are dating, you can’t be my patient. It’s not considered ethical. Even if we keep this to ourselves for a few months - and we ought to, Hannibal, alright? - and I officially severe the patient-doctor relationship now, the optics aren’t great. But I think I can manage it.”

“Who am I going to run off and tell, Dr. Bloom?”

“That might be funny from where you’re standing, but I’ll bet you anything you like that Alana gives me hot hell about this. She’s very protective of you, you know.”

Hannibal’s hands tighten around the steering wheel. “She’s that way with everyone,” he says, dismissively.

Will shrugs with one shoulder, then winces at the bolt of pain the movement invokes. “Maybe so, but that’s no reason to discount her compassion for you.

“You know, I had viral encephalitis a few years back, and Alana was very attentive during the crisis and recovery.”

Hannibal curses under his breath, impressed. “That’s dangerous, isn’t it?”

“It is, especially if you let it go as long as I did. I was an ass about the entire thing. I convinced myself that I had the flu for the longest time, and then when things started getting really bizarre I decided that I was simply going crazy, so of course I tried my damndest to hide it from everyone else.

“Alana was the one who finally caught on to what I was doing and dragged me to the hospital. By then, it was so bad that I was just short of actively dying - about a quarter of people with such advanced cases don’t survive. That was a fact that Alana stressed several times, once she felt that I was well enough to be be yelled at.”

“She knows how to yell?” Hannibal asks, genuinely surprised.

“She has a great talent for yelling, I promise you, especially if she’s feeling hurt or scared or disappointed with you. I managed to invoke all those feelings and more, and in quick session; she was frightened when I had a seizure in her office and when she found out just how badly off I was, and then she felt betrayed because I hadn’t disclosed that I suspected I was ill during any of our sessions.

“She was there for me while I was in recovery, though. Very kind. I wanted to strangle her half the time.”

Hannibal makes a small annoyed sound at that last bit but otherwise ignores it. “You’re one of her patients?” he asks instead.

“I am. It’s reassuring, knowing that I can trick someone who’s that skilled at what she does. Alana is a good therapist - terribly compassionate, almost to a fault, and most of her patients benefit wonderfully from that. But ultimately she isn’t really capable of understanding people like us.”

Will says this so casually that Hannibal knows he is watching to see his reaction. Hannibal keeps his face impassive, refrains from meeting Will’s eyes in the mirror.

He isn’t sure how to feel about being grouped in like that with Will and whoever else constitutes that "us."

Parting feels strangely awkward.

Will is exhausted and in obvious pain by the time they reach his house, the second leg of their journey having been considerably longer than the first day, and Hannibal can sense how badly he wants to be left alone to deal with that in his own way. Hannibal insists on carrying his bags inside for him, though.

“Come by my office tomorrow at the regular time and we’ll complete the paperwork,” Will tells him, as they stand in the entry hall. “I’d think of someone to transfer you to, but…”

“But it wouldn’t be safe for either of us for me to even begin to be honest with another therapist,” Hannibal finishes.

Will gives a ghost of a shrug and spreads his hands as though to say, what can you do?

Hannibal thinks that maybe he should try to kiss Will goodbye, or at least offer a loose hug, one that’s sensitive to his injuries. He’d like to, but Will has his own arms wrapped around himself, leaning there with his shoulder against the wall as though he can’t quite hold up his own weight. He feels closed in on himself, and that makes Hannibal anxious.

“I’m just worn out, Hannibal,” Will tells him, as though he can read what Hannibal is thinking. “Don’t worry about it - you haven’t done anything wrong.”

Hannibal nods, accepting this. “I’ll see you tomorrow then,” he says, and turns away to lead Beth to his own car.

Despite all the potential difficulties he can see moving forward, Hannibal is cheerful during the drive home. When the radio plays Fleetwood Mac’s *Over My Head* , Hannibal sings along softly and scratches Beth behind the ear.

But when he pulls into his own driveway, Jack Crawford is sitting on his front steps, waiting for him.

Chapter End Notes

That's it for this story. The next installment in the series, "Means of Influence," will be coming soon, and I'm very excited about it (though a little anxious) because I think that one is going to be a good deal longer and more narratively complex than these first two.

I want to thank everyone who has stuck with the story so far, especially all the wonderful people who've left comments. Yall sustain me, you keep me focused, you

give me so much to think about and so many good ideas about how to keep building this AU.

Love you guys. <3

PS, In keeping with "Stevie Nicks songs that I associate with Hannigram" theme that I apparently have going, "Over My Head" is such a GREAT song for this version of the characters.

Chapter 16

Just a quick heads up so no one misses this.

The first two chapters of the new story are up now, and can be found at this link.

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!